

Operator Certification Program Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator Frequently Asked Questions

Effective July 1, 2014, the responsibility for California's operator certification program for operators of public water systems was transferred from the State Department of Public Health to the State Water Resources Control Board. The transfer was accomplished by means of the addition of new Section 116271 to the Health and Safety Code. However, no change was made to the operator certification program statutes or regulations. The Office of Operator Certification is comprised of two programs.

Drinking Water Operator Certification Program (DWOCP) - The goal of the program is to ensure that skilled professionals are overseeing the treatment and distribution of safe drinking water. Operator certification is an important step in promoting compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA).

Wastewater Operator Certification Program (WWOCP) – The goal is to ensure that operators of wastewater treatment facilities in the State meet the minimum level of competence; thereby, protecting public health and the environment.

All sections, subsections, or tables cited within this document are referenced from the California Code of Regulations Title 23 Waters, Division 3 of the State Water Resources Control Board and Regional Water Quality Control Boards, Chapter 26 Wastewater Treatment Plant Classification, Operator Certification, and Contract Operator Registration.

GENERAL

1. What is the Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator Certification Program?

The Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator Certification Program certifies that operators, register contract operators, and classify wastewater treatment plants. WWOCP conducts the examinations required by the regulations, process and mail certificates, applications, and renewal notices. To contact the WWOCP, see our contact information at:

http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/operator_certification/

2. What is the difference between drinking water and wastewater treatment plant operator certification?

Drinking water operator certification is separate from wastewater operator certification. Drinking water treatment plant operator certification is required to work as an operator in a treatment plant that produces water for human consumption in homes and businesses. Wastewater treatment plant operator certification is required to work as an operator in a treatment plant that receives and treats wastewater from homes and businesses. The Drinking Water and Wastewater Operator Certification programs are a part of the Division of Financial Assistance (DFA) within the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board). Each program is guided by its own set of

regulations. Before July 1, 2014, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) administered the drinking water treatment plant operator certification program. The Drinking Water program processes applications, administers examinations, and issues certificates to applicants who meet the requirements for distribution and treatment operators.

3. How do I change my address with the Wastewater Office of Operator Certification?

If you have a change of address, complete the [New/Change of Contact](#) form and provide WWOCP with the updated information. Signature is required. Please submit your signed form via email, fax, or mail the completed form back to us.

4. How can I get a job as a wastewater treatment plant operator?

WWOCP is not involved in the hiring of operators. Owners of wastewater treatment plants, including cities, counties, special districts, and private owners, hire operators for their wastewater treatment plants. Additionally, registered contract operators hire operators for wastewater treatment plants that they operate. Potential sources of job listings are local newspapers and water/wastewater agency web sites.

5. Where can I take wastewater treatment plant operator courses?

Many state university campuses and community colleges offer wastewater treatment plant training courses. There also are non-profit and for-profit organizations that offer training. Please be aware that the law only allows us to recognize courses given by non-profit colleges, universities, professional associations or other private/public agencies. For-profit organization coursework will not be recognized. Please refer to the Wastewater Operator Certificate Training Directory at http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/operator_certification/docs/trng_dir.pdf.

6. How can I find a certified operator for my wastewater treatment plant?

WWOCP is permitted to release the names, addresses, and grades of certified operators that have authorized WWOCP to release their personal information to owners of wastewater treatment plants for recruitment purposes. Owners should submit mailing list requests by using the [Request for Mailing List of Certified Operators](#) form. If a private company is recruiting for an owner, the owner should submit the form and indicate in the *Special Instructions* section, the name and email address or physical address where WWOCP should send the mailing list. We can send the mailing list via email or by mail. We only are permitted to release this information to owners or authorized designated representatives of wastewater treatment plants.

7. How do I add myself to the Mailing List of the Certified Operators?

Click on the [Email List Subscription form](#) and follow the instructions listed on the website.

8. Why have my fees increased?

The new fees took effect April 1, 2013. The fee increase was necessary because the associated costs of WWOCP have increased significantly since the last fee increase in 2003. See the [Operator Certification Fee Schedule](#) for detailed costs.

9. What regulations apply to certified and contract operators?

The State Water Board's Operator Certification regulations are located at:
http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/operator_certification/docs/ocr_clean.pdf

10. What are the major changes to the amended regulations?

The Wastewater Operator Certification Program's Fact Sheet http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/operator_certification/docs/fact_sheet_opcert.pdf provides a summary of "What's New" and "What's Changed?" in the amended regulations. To view the amended regulations in their entirety, visit the Office of Operator Certification home page.

EXAMINATION

11. What are the requirements to take a Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination?

You must meet the minimum educational [requirements](#) for the desired grade level by the final filing date deadline. You are not required to have certified experience to take the examination; however, you will need to have the requisite experience in order to qualify to become certified. The Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination is given twice a year. Examinations are scheduled in cities throughout the state of California, and each approved applicant is assigned to an examination site based on their mailing county code.

12. Can I get a refund for the examination fee? How do I request it?

WWOCP cannot refund your application processing fee; however, the examination fee can be refunded. According to the Regulations, Section 3700(e), "An applicant who has paid the examination fee, but does not take an examination, may request a refund of the examination fee from the Office of Operator Certification." For example, if you applied for a grade I examination and paid the \$140.00 fee for the examination (\$70.00 for the Application Processing Fee and \$70.00 for the Examination Fee) and you were not able to make your scheduled examination, you may request a refund for the \$70.00 examination fee. In order to receive an examination fee refund, send in a written signed request including the following information: the reason why you qualify for refund, the amount you are requesting (minus the non-refundable application fee), the check number, and who you want to make the check payable to.

13. What if I have a disability and would like to request a reasonable accommodation to take the examination?

Submit a current signed physician's note to WWOCP. The note must include a specific request listing the reasonable accommodation (for example, request for more time, etc.) and the term of the accommodation (ex. 6 months.).

14. When are applications due for the Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination?

The final filing date deadline is sixty (60) days before the scheduled Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination ([Examination Schedule](#)). A complete application package, including fees, must be **RECEIVED** by the Office of Operator Certification no later than the final filing date deadline. The State Water Board's regulations do not allow for any exceptions. Applications may be submitted any time before the final filing date deadline.

15. If I pass, how long are my Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination results valid?

Passing examination results are valid for four years from the date on the notice of the examination results. You will need to re-take the examination if you do not obtain certification within four years from the date of the results letter.

16. What study materials are available for the Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination?

The Office of Operator Certification does not endorse specific reference materials. However, the Office of Operator Certification does have a list of suggested [study material](#) that may be helpful.

17. Do I need a certificate to work at a wastewater treatment plant?

Yes, you are required to have a certificate to work as an operator at:

- a.) A facility owned by a state, local, or federal agency;
- b.) A privately owned facility used in the treatment or reclamation of sewage or industrial wastes, and regulated by the Public Utilities Commission;
- c.) Or a privately owned facility used primarily in the treatment or reclamation of sewage, and for which the State Water Board or a Regional Water Board has issued waste discharge requirements.

A wastewater treatment plant operator certificate is needed only if you operate a WWTP.

NOTE: While laboratory technicians do not need wastewater treatment plant certification, they must be certified by the California Water Environment Association (CWEA) in accordance with Health and Safety Code section 100825, et seq.

CERTIFICATION

18. How can I get certified?

There are four things that you must do in order to get certified:

- a. Pass the Examination You must pass a written wastewater treatment plant operator examination for the desired grade level (or higher) certification. The examinations for all grade levels are given twice each year throughout the State of California.
- b. Pay the Operator Certification Fee See the Wastewater [Operator Certification Fee Schedule](#) to find out how much each grade costs.
- c. Meet the educational requirements An applicant for an operator certificate must have completed the minimum amount of education prescribed in [section 3687](#) for certification for the desired trade level (or higher).
- d. You must meet the experience requirements for the desired grade level. See section 3687, [Operator Certification Requirements Table](#) for each certification grade's qualifying experience requirements. To apply for a certificate, submit a

complete [application for certification](#) with the appropriate fees. Your experience must be in the operation of a wastewater treatment plant with a valid operator certificate or operator-in-training certificate, or having obtained qualifying experience credit. NOTE: No experience or passing the wastewater treatment plant operator examination is necessary for a Grade I operator-in-training certificate.

19. How do I obtain qualifying experience?

- a.) Applicants can make an irrevocable election to substitute sixteen educational points for one year of qualifying experience credit (may substitute for multiple years); however, educational points cannot be used to substitute the 1800 hours of OIT experience. Educational points cannot be substituted for qualifying experience credit to satisfy educational requirements in the Operator Certification Requirements Table in Section 3687 for certification or qualifying for an examination.
- b.) An applicant for operator certification who has acquired at least one year of full-time qualifying experience at a WWTP may receive qualifying experience credit, provided certain conditions are met. ([See Section 3684](#))
- c.) The WWOCP shall give qualifying experience credit for experience acquired at a facility that treats wastewater in a state other than California, in a territory, or on land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe, provided the duties are comparable to the duties of an operator at a WWTP and provided that during the time of employment, the applicant held a valid, unexpired certification of the appropriate grade level issued by a certifying body and the certification requirements are comparable to the requirements of the regulations.

20. How many different levels of operator certification are there?

There are five levels of wastewater treatment plant certification: Grade I thru Grade V. Additionally, an individual may be certified as an operator-in-training (OIT) while gaining the knowledge and experience necessary to be a certified operator. A person may apply for OIT certification at the Grade II through Grade V levels if the applicant has passed an examination at that grade level or higher and the applicant's examination results have not expired.

21. How long is a certificate valid?

Certificates are valid for two years.

22. How do I renew my certificate?

At least 60 calendar days before the expiration of a wastewater treatment plant operator certificate, WWOCP will send a written notification of the expiration date to the certificate holder at their address of record; however, it is the operators' responsibility to submit an [application for renewal](#) along with the appropriate fees. Failure to receive a notice of renewal letter from the Wastewater Operator Certification Program does not relieve the certificate holder from the responsibility of renewing a certificate before the expiration date. The application must be **received** before the certification expiration date. You will receive a new certificate within 30 calendar days from receipt of completed renewal application. Renewal is very important; as it is illegal to work as an operator with an expired certificate.

23. How do I replace my certificate (if it was stolen, lost, damaged, etc.)?

According to Section 3702.6, the Wastewater Operator Certification Program can send out replacement certificates as long as the operator “submits a statement explaining the circumstances of the loss, theft, damage, or destruction and submits the replacement fee” of \$50.00.

OPERATOR-IN-TRAINING

24. What is an Operator-in-Training (OIT)?

An OIT is a person working at a wastewater treatment plant who is gaining the experience necessary to become a certified operator. To receive an OIT certificate, you must complete an [OIT application](#) and pay the appropriate fees. After the application is complete, the Wastewater Operator Certification Program will issue a certificate allowing you to operate at a wastewater treatment plant under the direct supervision of a certified operator. Please refer to [Section 3682.1](#) and [Section 3671](#) of the regulations for more information.

25. Must I have a job at a wastewater treatment plant to get an OIT Certificate?

Yes. OIT Certificates are issued to the wastewater treatment plants and not to the individual operators.

26. How many hours do I need to qualify for one year of full-time experience?

Eighteen hundred (1,800) hours of experience will qualify as one year of full-time qualifying experience. Note: Volunteer, part-time, full-time and overtime hours qualify.

27. How do I become an Operator-In-Training (OIT)?

You must meet the following requirements

- a.) Meet the educational requirements.
- b.) Secure a position (either paid or volunteer) with a wastewater treatment plant.
- c.) Complete an OIT application
- d.) Make sure that the chief plant operator (CPO) signed the OIT application.
- e.) Make sure that you have signed the OIT application.
- f.) Attach a current duty statement on the wastewater treatment plants official letterhead or have the duty statement signed by the CPO.
- g.) A check or money order with the appropriate application fee.

28. How much supervision does an Operator-In-Training (OIT) need?

According to the State Water Board regulation Section 3682, an OIT is required to work under the direct supervision of an operator with a certificate of equal or higher grade. “Direct supervision” means the supervising operator oversees and inspects the work performed by the OIT and provides training to ensure the safe and proper execution of the OIT’s duties. The supervising operator must be present at the wastewater treatment plant or otherwise available to consult with; and provide assistance to the OIT in order to ensure the safe and proper execution of the OIT’s duties. An OIT cannot work as the only operator at a plant. It is illegal for an OIT to operate without the direct supervision of a certified operator. Additionally, an OIT will NOT receive qualifying experience for any time that he or she has operated without direct supervision.

LONE OPERATOR

29. What is a Lone Operator?

A Lone Operator is an operator, at a grade level lower than a designated-operator-in-charge, approved by the Wastewater Operator Certification Program to work alone at a wastewater treatment plant. An operator-in-training cannot be a "Lone Operator."

30. How can I assign a Lone Operator?

A Chief Plant Operator (CPO) of a wastewater treatment plant must receive approval from the Wastewater Operator Certification Program before assigning an Operator as a Lone Operator. The CPO must demonstrate that the owner has had difficulty, despite due diligence, hiring a certified operator of the appropriate grade to operate the wastewater treatment plant. The chief plant operator shall request approval and shall submit a written plan that includes:

- a.) the name(s) and grade level(s) of the lone operator(s) and the proposed duties of the lone operator(s);
- b.) a work schedule showing when the lone operator(s) will be working alone; and
- c.) the procedure lone operator(s) will use to communicate with the chief plant operator, the designated operator-in-charge, or an operator at the same or higher grade level as the designated operator-in-charge when the lone operator(s) needs direction.

31. How long are Lone Operator approvals valid?

An approval to use a Lone Operator granted by the Wastewater Operator Certification Program is valid for 180 days.

PROVISIONAL OPERATOR

32. What is a Provisional Operator?

A Provisional Operator is an operator who is solely responsible for the operation of a **Class I** wastewater treatment plant, does not have a valid operator certification, but has passed the grade I certification examination and he/she has received written approval from the WWOCP to use a provisional operator and who possesses a valid, unexpired provisional operator certificate.

33. How can I hire a Provisional Operator?

An owner of a Class I wastewater treatment plant can apply to WWOCP to use a Provisional Operator. The owner must demonstrate that the owner has had difficulty, despite due diligence, hiring a certified operator of the appropriate grade to operate the wastewater treatment plant.

34. How long is a Provisional Operator approval valid?

An approval to use a Provisional Operator granted by WWTPOCP is valid for five years.

35. How long is a Provisional Operator certificate valid? Can I as an individual get a Provisional Operator Certification?

A Provisional Operator certificate is valid for a maximum of two years. A Provisional Operator certificate cannot be renewed. The Provisional Operator Certification application must be submitted by a wastewater treatment plant and therefore cannot be issued to an individual.

36. How much are the Provisional Operator fees?

The request to use a Provisional Operator fee is \$1,000. The Provisional Operator certificate fee is \$170.

DESIGNATED OPERATOR-IN-CHARGE

37. What is a Designated Operator-in-Charge?

A Designated Operator-in-Charge (DOIC) is an operator appointed by the Chief Plant Operator (CPO) to be responsible for the overall operation of a wastewater treatment plant, including compliance with the applicable waste discharge requirements, when the CPO is unable to carry out the responsibilities of the position of CPO. The DOIC shall report to the CPO.

Each CPO and DOIC shall possess a valid operator certificate at a grade level at least equivalent to the following:

Wastewater Treatment Plant Classification	Minimum Grade Level of CPO	Minimum Grade Level of DOIC
I	I	I
II	II	I
III	III	II
IV	IV	III
V	V	III

38. As a Chief Plant Operator, am I required to appoint a designated Operator-in-Charge?

A Chief Plant Operator (CPO) must appoint a certified operator to be the Designated Operator-In-Charge for any period of time during which the CPO is unable to carry out the responsibilities of the position of CPO.

EXAMINATION WAIVER (RECIPROCITY)

39. What is an Examination Waiver?

The Wastewater Operator Certification Program shall waive the examination requirement and the examination fee if the applicant holds a valid, unexpired certificate issued by a certifying body for a position comparable to that of an operator at a wastewater treatment plant, provided:

- a.) The experience, education, and examination requirements of the current certifying body are comparable to the Wastewater Operator Certification Program's requirements;

- b.) The applicant meets the minimum education and qualifying experience requirements for the applicable grade level;
- c.) The applicant has passed a written examination, administered by the certifying body, that is comparable to the examination given by the Wastewater Operator Certification Program for the applicable grade of operator certification; and
- d.) The applicant completes an application for operator certification and pays the certification and examination waiver fees.

ENFORCEMENT

40. What are the penalties for not complying with the Wastewater Operator Certification statutes and regulations?

Violation of the operator certification statutes and regulations are taken seriously. Depending on the severity of the violation, enforcement can range from disciplinary actions such as suspension or revocation of an operator's certificate, reprimand, probation, and/or imposition of administrative civil liability (monetary penalty). For more information about disciplinary actions and administrative civil liability, see article 9.

41. Who investigates and enforces violations of the Operator Certification statutes and regulations?

[The State Water Board's Office of Enforcement \(OE\)](#) receives and investigates violations of the Operator Certification Statutes and regulations.

42. A discretionary (disciplinary) decision has been made against me. Can I Appeal?

You may request reconsideration from the Director of the Office of Enforcement. For more information see [Article 9, section 3712](#).

43. How do I file a complaint?

There are two ways you can file a complaint of an operator's wrong-doing. You can contact the State Water Board's Office of Enforcement Special Investigations Supervisor at (916) 341-5891, or you can ["File an Environmental Complaint"](#) with the California Environmental Protection Agency.

44. Will the information I provide remain confidential if I file a complaint?

The State Water Board will maintain confidentiality of your information to the extent allowed by state and federal law. In order to follow up on your complaint, the State Water Board may need to share the information you give us with other regulators or government agencies. This may include sharing any personal information you include in your complaint.

The information you provide may also be disclosed in the following circumstances:

- a.) In response to a Public Records Act request, as allowed by the California Public Records Act;
- b.) To another government agency as required by state or federal law;
- c.) In response to a court or administrative order, a subpoena, or a search warrant; or

d.) In a final enforcement action, if we need your information to substantiate a violation.

45. If I file a complaint, will I be protected against retaliation?

The Wastewater Operator Certification Program does not have the authority or the means to protect a conscientious operator from retaliation for their whistleblowing activities. These activities can include communication with the media, regulatory, or enforcement authorities, members of the Legislature, or environmental and special interest groups. Such activities are protected as long as the employee has reasonable grounds for believing that his/her information is correct. For more information please see www.whistleblowers.gov.

The Federal law covering whistleblowers at wastewater treatment plants is the Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 507 of the CWA states in part: *"No person shall fire, or in any other way discriminate against, or cause to be fired or discriminated against, any employee or authorized representative of employees by reason of fact that such employee or representative has filed, instituted, or caused to be filed or instituted any proceedings under this Act, or has testified or is about to testify in any proceedings resulting from the administration or enforcement of the provisions of this Act."* Additional laws may apply.